

Nest Success

A little bird with a unique nest inspires
a flight of fancy at MoDOT.



By Melissa Black

MoDOT always puts safety first – even if it’s the safety of a little brown bird in northwest Missouri. That’s why MoDOT couldn’t stand by after discovering the bird’s fate literally was placed in its hands. The department made the most of an unusual opportunity and let an idea take flight.

On a warm summer day last year, a MoDOT crew was gathering fill dirt from a bank off Route 159 in the northwest corner of Missouri in Holt County. As the backhoe began scooping dirt from the cliff side, a strange phenomenon occurred.

“The crew noticed a large number of birds swirling around the equipment operator and these odd-looking little holes in the side of the cliff,” says Keith Hoover, MoDOT maintenance superintendent for the Maryville area. “We weren’t sure what was going on, but we stopped digging the bank so we could dig further into the situation.”

Local experts at the nearby U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge said the birds were part of a colony of bank swallows, a neo-tropical bird that migrates in the fall to Central and



People *in motion*



By Pam Droog
Photography by Mike Wright

Eve
Jost

Location: MoDOT’s Traffic Information Center in Chesterfield.

Position: Customer Service Representative

How she got there: Jost started at MoDOT in 1993 as a receptionist after working for various St. Louis law firms for several years. She joined MoDOT’s St. Louis area Customer Service Center when that operation was created in 1996.

“I met everybody. Everyone who works at MoDOT came through the door, along with St. Louis mayors, senators, media people. It was a very high-visibility job and I really liked it.”

What she does: Jost switched to the night shift in 1998. She answers the phones from 3:30 p.m. to midnight, Monday through Friday. Some callers ask about construction, where highways will be closed and in what direction.

“We have a lot of nighttime construction, and no one wants to get stuck taking 30 minutes to drive half a mile.”

Most of Jost’s nightly calls are from police or Highway Patrol officers, notifying her about emergency situations.

“They let me know if we need to respond to an accident or a fuel spill or a flooded roadway, for example. Then I get the boys out there to take care of it.”

The “boys” include MoDOT’s emergency response team and a night electrician, who’s on hand to repair broken lights or signals. Until 7:30 p.m., Jost also works with MoDOT’s Motorist Assist crews, who clear up traffic incidents and help stranded motorists on the major interstates.

Some memorable calls: Jost once got a call from “a very talkative little old lady,” she recalls. “She told me her driver’s license was suspended, and she had been traveling by riding lawn mower. She had a lot of cats and asked if MoDOT could pick up

continued on page 9

"The crew noticed these odd-looking little holes ..."

South America. This particular colony had been nesting in the area – specifically, in the cliff where the highway workers took fill dirt – for 15 years or more.

Loess is More

The dirt of choice for bank swallows is actually called loess. This type of soil is found only in river areas in China along the Yangtze River, a few areas in Germany, and along the Missouri River in northwest Missouri and southwest Iowa.



Loess is extremely thick, from 10 to 60 feet. Unlike ordinary dirt, which crumbles and moves easily when disturbed, loess can be cut without eroding. This makes it a perfect habitat for the swallows, and allows them to nest well out of predators' reach.

After the bank-swallow colonies migrate north in the summer to breed, males begin to dig a hole in the loess (some birds won't use an old hole). The birds then pair up, and both the female and male bird work together to excavate a two-to-three-foot tunnel that slopes upward slightly at the end. Inside, the birds create a nest lined with grass.

MoDOT Teams Up

The bank swallow is one of approximately 75 swallow species in the world. Only eight of these are found in North America, and only six are common in Missouri. The birds have slender bodies with long, pointed wings. At just 5-1/4 inches long, they're the smallest swallows, distinguished by a brownish-gray breast band. They feed on insects and hunt with their mouths open as they fly, swooping and darting to zero in on prey.

"Swallows can usually be seen perching in long rows on branches and wires," says Charles Marshall, environmental education specialist for the Squaw Creek Refuge. "But, because bank swallows usually nest in remote river areas, few people have had the opportunity to watch them up close."



As soon as MoDOT learned about the bank swallows, it formed a partnership with the Squaw Creek Refuge to protect the site for the birds.

"This site is very unusual because people can actually get close enough to watch the bank swallows," Marshall says. "It's not fancy, and to an average person who knows very little or nothing about the bank swallow, they might take this site for granted, but it's truly significant."

Wings and Prayers

The refuge developed and installed two signs to help educate visitors about the bank-swallow habitat they were viewing. MoDOT created a gravel parking lot and installed barriers to keep visitors from getting too close to the colony. Crews used on-hand supplies to create the pull-off area quickly and inexpensively. In all, it took less than one day to create the site – but the positive effects ought to last well into the future.

"This isn't something anyone really planned for," Marshall says. "We just got lucky and it happened. In situations like this, you just find a way to make it work."

Both organizations continue to contribute to the beauty and success of the site. They both pick up trash and mow to keep the area an inviting habitat for both birds and observers. Plans also are underway for the two agencies to collaborate on an educational bank-swallow brochure that will be available next spring.

"This cooperative effort between our two agencies shows how much good you can



People *in motion*

continued from page 7

do just by working together and caring a little,” Marshall says. “We want to promote this site more to the general public so more people can enjoy it.”

In addition, Hoover says, once the birds have left for the summer, MoDOT maintenance crews will use a backhoe and loader to clear away some of the bank dirt, to make it appear there aren’t as many holes.

“We did this last year with good results,” Hoover says. “Some of the birds don’t like to nest in recycled holes, so this gives the birds more area to make new nests.

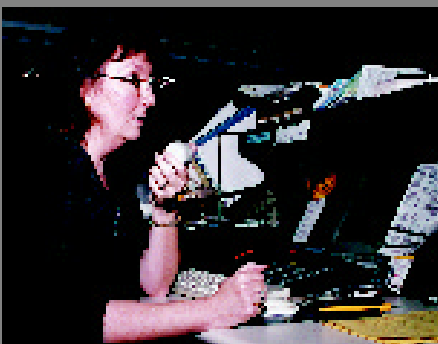
“It’s good for the birds and us, because we can use the dirt. We can all be good for each other.”

Marshall adds that the bank swallow is one of many birds to be found at the nearby Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge. Established in 1935, Squaw Creek has more than 7,350 acres of man-made marshes that supply food, water and shelter for 31 kinds of mammals, 35 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 273 species of birds. At peak migration times, Squaw Creek visitors can see as many as 300,000 snow geese, 100,000 ducks and 300 bald eagles.

“We try and pay attention to the numbers of all our birds, and the number of neo-tropical birds seems to be declining in recent years,” Marshall says. “If we’re going to maintain the numbers we have and protect future generations of birds, we’ve got to provide the habitat for them.” ■

Painting on page 6, “The Bank Swallow,” by John James Audubon (painted in 1824)

According to John James Audubon in *Birds of America*, “The sociability and gentleness of these birds, ... the low and unobtrusive twittering of their voice, in short, all their actions and economy, are delightful to contemplate...”



A caller once asked Jost if MoDOT could pick up and deliver an 80-lb. bag of catfood...

an 80-pound bag of cat food and deliver it to her, and she’d pay us back. I told her, ‘I’m sorry, but we don’t deliver cat food.’ ”

Sometimes callers want to know how to plan a trip.

“A woman asked how she could get from St. Louis to California on old Route 66. I told her to take Interstate 44. She called back and said, ‘You didn’t tell me which direction.’ ”

Jost says sometimes callers can be quite irate, “ ... but I know they just want to vent. I focus on the majority of the people who are so nice. If you’re friendly and try to help, they really appreciate it.”

Favorite part of job: Jost has fewer parking problems and is less exhausted when she gets home since switching to the night shift because she avoids rush-hour driving. She can wear jeans every day, so she also spends less money on clothes.

“But my real favorite thing about this job is when a customer calls in to thank us for some work we’ve performed.”

After hours: Jost enjoys cooking German and Russian food, hooking rugs, gardening and reading – historical novels, mysteries, westerns or anything by Cormac McCarthy. She and her husband, Reinhart, who teaches German at Saint Louis University, travel every other year to his native Germany.

“There’s nothing like having a native European show you all the interesting sights. You don’t have to struggle to figure out the train schedule.”

Useful information: When you call 1-888-ASK MODOT (275-6636), you’ll automatically be connected to the Customer Service Center in your area or General Headquarters in Jefferson City. Customer service representatives like Eve Jost are standing by to take your transportation emergency calls, answer transportation questions, provide maps and MoDOT publications, and tell you about road-condition and construction-project status.